

Hubert Butler Essay Prize: What happened to Europe without frontiers?



The great Irish essayist Hubert Butler was a cosmopolitan, his sensibility being both Irish and passionately European. He situated Ireland squarely in the main current of European history, whereas England occupied a kind of eccentric tributary, or even backwater, of its own making. Thus, the vote for Brexit would not have surprised him, writes [Roy Foster](#) who judged the inaugural [Hubert Butler Essay Prize](#) this year.

Judging the Hubert Butler Essay Prize (presented at the Irish Embassy to Nigel Lewis on 24 October) made me think about Ireland and Europe – and, yet again, about the great Irish essayist Hubert Butler – for the inspiration which his extraordinary essays have provided since they began being published in volume form by Antony Farrell's Lilliput Press in 1985.

In a large oeuvre published in little magazines from about 1930 onwards, Butler (born in 1900) effectively reinvented the essay form, an achievement recognised in the acclaim he has received from writers as distinguished as Joseph Brodsky, Neal Ascherson, Fintan O'Toole and John Banville. Into a short compass, often no more than half a dozen pages, Butler compressed multitudes; moving easily from memory and observation to reflection in a style which was subtly inflected, sometimes laceratingly vivid, and utterly his own. His analytical cut-and-thrust was scintillating, skewering double-think or sloppy reasoning with one swift metaphor. And he was unnervingly prescient about questions of religion, national identity and the fractured histories of Central and Eastern Europe, no less than Ireland. Above all, he had a gift for catching the essence of a historical moment, often in an uncannily prophetic way.

As the roll-call of his admirers might indicate, his sensibility was both Irish and passionately European; like John Stuart Mill, he situated Ireland squarely in the main current of European history, whereas England occupied a kind of eccentric tributary, or even backwater, of its own making. Thus, the vote for Brexit would not have surprised him. From early on, he took a sharply sceptical line on the mounting flood of synthesized Anglo-American culture; before the words 'dumbing-down' and 'globalization' were coined he forecast exactly what these inelegant terms entailed. Moreover, in the 1930s he had seen totalitarianism up close, and he was sharply alert to the insidious ways in which it took effect.

Along with his steady commitment to small communities, minority nationalities, and the humane traditions of cosmopolitanism in its widest sense, Butler sustained a lifelong interest in the way states are made – particularly in the drastic reordering of national boundaries after the First World War. Time and again, his questing intelligence probed the question of borders, and what they signified. As a southern Irish Protestant who disliked partition, the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic held particular interest for him.

In the early 1950s, he wrote a draft editorial for a projected new Irish literary journal which never transpired. In this piece, called 'Crossing the Border', he denounced the kind of passive intellectual stagnation which prevents creative discussion of our differences. 'We have been hypnotised into thinking that there is a real barrier there, and, like those neurotic hens which can be kept from straying by drawing a chalk ring round them, we do not venture across.' Later in the same essay, he forecast that, if Ulster's unique kind of Irishness were generously recognised, 'the border will cease to become a menace and an anxiety. Either it will become meaningless and will drop off painlessly like a strip of sticking-plaster from a wound that has healed, or else it will survive in some modified form as a definition which distinguishes but does not divide.'^[1]

After the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, this benign scenario edged a little nearer; but the EU referendum of 2016 threw the gears crashingly into reverse. At the same time, the migration crisis across Europe brought questions of boundaries and borders to centre stage once more, while the idea of easy transition between countries, which inspired the Schengen Agreement, was negated at a stroke. For these and other reasons, it seemed to the judges of the first Hubert Butler Essay prize that the topic of borders within Europe was of pressing relevance, and also carried an appropriately Butlerian resonance. The topic chosen was 'What happened to Europe without frontiers?' Nearly all of the thirty-odd entries lived up to the challenge, many of them combining reflections on the Irish Border with a broader consideration of frontiers within Europe at this uneasy moment of the EU's history, and perceptively raising the questions of mass migration movements and the development of right-wing nationalisms.

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The essays were of an impressively high standard, and we found it hard to arrive at a shortlist of three, from which the winner and two runners-up would be selected. But we chose three essays which lived up to the Butlerian model of fitting wide-ranging intellectual explorations into an economic compass (the word-length was a strict 3000): carried off with elegant style. The three short-listed authors were Rachel Andrews, Nigel Lewis and Victoria Mason.

Rachel Andrews's essay opens with a picture of the Irish Border before Brexit, and considers how Northern Ireland appeared to a child growing up in Cork in the 1970s, frankly admitting what she calls the 'distancing and distaste' evinced by many in the Republic for a part of the map where – as one cartoonist put it – 'here be dragons'. The essay goes on to reflect on attitudes encountered in later years, during an Erasmus year abroad, or living and working in Paris – reflecting the kind of European experience which has been opened up to Irish people in the decades since joining the EU, and will shortly be denied to young Britons.

More immediately, she recounts the experience of actually working in Northern Ireland, on a project which took her into the Maze Prison. All this is the background for a highly intelligent meditation on the border as – on one level – 'a place of struggle' and on another, a creatively amorphous space resisting categorisation – which 'we seemed to have found a way to live with, or live within'. The reconciliation of different identities is a strong theme here (invoking both Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Heine): but also, ominously, she instances the alienation of many French Muslims, and the mounting bitterness of Greek citizens against the perceived dictation from Germany and France. In the end she argues against what she calls "forging certainties", preferring explorations in the realm of 'the non-being, the uncertain the becoming': ending with the great image of the artist Rita Duffy's project to tow an iceberg from the Arctic to Belfast, where it could be moored and allowed to melt. The icebergs are still all around us, in Bosnia no less than Northern Ireland, but this essay points at ways we can think towards a thaw.

Nigel Lewis's essay opens beguilingly with Saint Benedict in Umbria during the late Roman Empire, and fans out to consider the era of Adenauer, Schuman and Monnet, and the competing ideas of "Europe" as a common cultural heritage, or a new Holy Roman Empire in the making. While judicious about the retention of national 'sovereignties', and what this means, he recognises (unlike many English commentators) the important point that 'the EU, like the EEC before it, has been defusing Europe like an unexploded bomb left over from World War II'.

But he also recognises the brush-fires sparked by separatist nationalisms and alt-right identity politics within European borders, and the dangers inherent in over-expansion and unprecedented migration: ending with the sobering reflection that we may be witnessing ‘a desperately sad, modern version of something that empires fear, barbarian invasion’. The conclusion of Nigel Lewis’s essay returns to Saint Benedict’s city of Norcia, this time in terms of its location in an earthquake zone, where an ancient pattern of seismic convulsions potentially awaits reactivation. In its structural development from personal experience to general reflection, its easy and imaginative range of historical reference, and its clear-eyed confrontation of unwelcome truths, this essay invokes the kind of approach and values which Hubert Butler represented, and was judged the winner.

Victoria Mason’s essay, like Rachel Andrews’s, starts with Northern Ireland, but from the standpoint of someone who grew up there when the Border had – following the Good Friday Agreement – indeed started to fade to the kind of informal boundary anticipated by Hubert Butler. To her generation, unlike her parents, a hard border seemed (I quote) ‘almost folkloric, belonging to another age. It never occurred to me that such another age might be located in the future as well as the past.’ She then instances Jacob Rees-Mogg’s ineffable proposal (‘folkloric’ might be too polite a word for it) that it would be easy, even desirable, to reinstate border checks ‘as we had during the Troubles’.

Borders are back in fashion, worldwide (a concept marvelously illustrated, I might add, in a photographic exhibition by Ianthe Ruthven currently on show at the Royal Geographical Society). Mason’s wide-ranging treatment concentrates on the political and humanitarian crisis caused by mass refugee movements, and makes the important point that the pressing question raised is one of European identity, moving to a thoughtful meditation on the relationship between borders, perceptions of national identity, and the reality and memory of war- especially post-1918 and post-1945. “Distance from war has softened its edges and sanitised its atrocities; it has allowed the hard borders which war keeps alive to become a source of hope instead of despair.’ She writes perceptively of the paradoxical conjunction of globalization and ‘nostalgic nationalism’. And, if there is hope, it is in the way that Brexit and its counterpart phenomena in other European countries, have reinvigorated a commitment to the European idea, and a reminder of what galvanised it- the determination to create structures which would militate against another European war.

Mason’s essay also reminds us that national pride can look toward the EU as well as identifying with one’s own perceived *patria* – as in Catalonia, or in Scotland. I think that many people in the room – certainly Adrian O’Neill, the impressively astute and eloquent Irish Ambassador – would agree with me that this is also emphatically true of Ireland.

[1] *Grandmother and Wolfe Tone* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 64, 68

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